

The Railway Strike of 1877

Jillian Kaskavage

Oregon High School, Oregon

Teacher: Sara Werckle

Throughout the course of the industrial age in America, there have been many strikes and protests against unfair treatment of employees. The railway strike of 1877 is one example. Even though the strikers lost the strike, they won the war over unjust management in the labor unions. There were various dealings that led to the strike and numerous violent acts during the protests. Communal responses were very important in these dealings along with the impacts it made on the industry.

Many events that led up to the railway strike, including the depression that occurred in 1873. Numerous men were unemployed and sought jobs in the railroad industry. Most important was the unregulated trade in the railway industry that caused monopolies and fraud, giving the railroad tycoons even more power over the labor laws. In the three years before the strike, wage rates of employees were cut by thirty-five percent, and men were forced to work fifteen to eighteen hours a day. Usually they had to wait three or four months before they received their pay that was due monthly. In some areas, families were left with as little as thirty-five cents a day after travel and work expenses were taken out. During 1877, another ten percent was cut and the labor force was cut in half. This caused the employees to work twice as hard for less pay.

The strikes began on July 16, 1877, when forty men in Baltimore left their trains of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. News of the strikes spread across the country, and by July 24, it expanded into the Michigan Central freight yards of Chicago. The next day a full blown battle

took place between police and protestors. Officials attacked the strikers with clubs and guns while arresting their leaders. Street cars were halted on the south side of the city, and sailors in the port walked out. A crowd of 8,000 massed at the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy roundhouse; it finally dispersed after three were killed and seven wounded. While waiting for troops requested from President Hayes and Illinois' Governor Cullom, 5,000 citizen volunteers were enrolled to patrol the area.

The Workingmen's Party in Chicago appointed an Executive Committee and attempted to gain control of the strike. The movement had the sympathy of the people in the city and the party encouraged workers to unite with the strikers. They also demanded that all industrial establishments shut down, but urged strikers to remain peaceable, yet firm in their protests.

On July 26, 10,000 assembled at the Halsted Street Viaduct. A police attack was beaten back until soldiers and mounted officers arrived. Twelve were killed in the battle while at least a hundred leaders of the movement were arrested. Between thirty and fifty men and women were killed in street fighting throughout the strike and at least a hundred wounded. The first freight train was sent east under military protection on July 28.

The public reaction to this crisis was mostly in favor of the strikers. The citizens had suffered through four years of depression previous to the incident, so they knew of the sufferings endured. Many of these civilians took part in rallies and riots of the railroad workers. On the other hand, the *New York Times* headline read "CITY IN POSSESSION OF COMMUNISTS." Though some newspapers opposed the strike, many helped in spreading propaganda for the rioters. Ministers and pastors also took part in the chaos. Reverend Henry Ward Beecher sarcastically preached on the low wages, "Men cannot live by bread, it is true; but the man who cannot live on bread and water is not fit to live."

By August 2, strikes around the country were halted by police, vigilantes, and government troops. Some railway companies had cancelled their wage cuts in order to prevent a strike once the news was spread; others gave in to the demands of the workers. Many companies fired employees and hired desperate, faithful workers in their place. Although few improvements were seen automatically proceeding the strike, it eventually called a halt to the railway industry's relentless wage cutting.

In conclusion, many people were killed all over the country in these violent protests for labor union rights. There were several events leading to the strike, and the strike itself was devastating. At hand was the popular support of the protests, but unexpectedly, the strike did not end in their favor. Railroads were very prominent in the nineteenth century, and there was an enormous amount of poverty stricken workers.

[From *Harper's Weekly*, Aug. 11, 1877, <http://www.railroadextra.com/sk7711.html> (Sept. 15, 2002); Paul Le Blanc, *The Railroad Strike of 1877*, <http://www.pittsburghafcio.org/railroad.html> (Sept. 15, 2002); Milton Meltzer, *Bread-And Roses*; Jonathan Donald, "Rediscovering America: Railroads, Robbers, and Rebels;" Samuel Yellen, *American Labor Struggles*.]